

Concerns Are Mounting Over Common Core Standards

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by **Andrea Neal**

When right and left wing activists find themselves on the same side of a controversy, it's worth probing why. Such is the case with the Common Core academic standards being implemented in Indiana and 45 other states. Conservatives and progressives alike see problems with them.

The right is concerned about imposition of a "federal curriculum" and the loss of local control. The left fears "one size fits all" instruction that will turn teachers into widget makers whose primary purpose is to prepare students for testing, not learning. Both question who's profiting financially from this new set of national academic standards for English and math that will dictate the content of curriculum, textbooks, teacher training and testing materials.

Senate Bill 193, which would delay implementation of the standards pending further review, passed the Senate 38-11 on Feb. 21. Since then, backers have poured tens of thousands of dollars into television ads to persuade the public and lawmakers to keep the standards in place.

Lawmakers have a duty to make sure the standards are right for Indiana, especially considering the breadth of expert opposition:

- "The assumption behind national standardization is that all students, regardless of state residence, should be able to do the same things at the same time. That ignores basic reality: states have different populations and challenges . . . Having different state standards allows better tailoring to people's actual needs than nationalization." — Neal McCluskey of the libertarian Cato Institute.
- "One mandated universal curricular program for all children just does not make conceptual sense, is intuitively contradictory and has no empirical backing . . . We should be increasing curricular diversity, not seeking to constrict it. — Christopher H. Tienken, editor of *the AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* (American Association of School Administrators).
- "The Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation . . . We are a nation of guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown new program at the same time." — Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University and former Bush administration official.

So where's support for the standards coming from? At both local and national levels, they are touted by politically moderate school reform groups — Democratic and Republican — that are backed financially by private foundations and big business. The Chamber of Commerce is on board. So are educational testing and publishing companies that will benefit directly from their implementation.

The movement has been "propelled by private entities with a national scope," according to "The Common Core: Educational Redeemer or Rainmaker?" The study was published in *the October Teachers College Record*, the nation's premier education research journal.

Billed as "educational redeemer," the movement is motivated by money, the researchers said, citing the prominent role played in the process by educational publishing and consulting companies.

Examples include the College Board, which administers the SAT test that will soon be aligned with Common Core, and Pearson, a publishing company selling textbooks, teacher training and student and teacher assessments.

People's World, a media outlet of organized labor, has raised concerns about the role played in Common Core

adoption by Stand for Children. Although the group began with children's rights advocacy as its focus, it now pushes a corporate education agenda focused on union-busting, *People's World* reports.

Stand for Children's donors include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, New Profit Inc. and the Walton Family Foundation.

In Indiana, ads promoting Common Core have been purchased by Stand for Children's state affiliate. Executive director Justin Ohlemiller said, "State chapters of Stand for Children choose what issues to focus on and our work is funded from multiple sources including member contributions and local donors."

Former Gov. Mitch Daniels and School Superintendent Tony Bennett pushed Indiana to adopt the Common Core in 2010. There was no public discussion at the time. Since then, a host of experts have emerged to question their quality and effectiveness.

At minimum Indiana lawmakers should ask this question: Who's running Indiana schools? Local elected boards and state policymakers? Or philanthropists, consultants, publishers and testing companies?

Andrea Neal is adjunct scholar with the Indiana Policy Review Foundation. Contact her at aneal@inpolicy.org.